



Pine-Strawberry Fire District

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January 15, 2021

U.S Department of Agriculture
Sandra Watts, Acting Regional Forester
333 Broadway Blvd SE
Albuquerque, NM, 87102

**Re: Fossil Creek Wild and Scenic River Comprehensive River Management Plan
#27457**

Ms. Watts,

Please accept this correspondence as my agency's public comment on the final draft of the Fossil Creek Comprehensive River Management Plan.

As for background, for the period of 2015 through 2020, a total of 740 persons have been rescued from, or treated for medical emergencies, in Fossil Creek. Also, during the same period 7 persons have died. It should be noted that the number of rescues would have been significantly higher had it not been for a 2 to 3 month closures of the Upper Springs Trail during the last three years due to fire restrictions by the Tonto National Forest.

It should be noted the Pine Strawberry Fire District is the closest rescue and emergency medical service agency to Fossil Creek and is heavily impacted by Fossil Creek rescue missions.

Compounding this public safety crisis, three roads that previously allowed rapid rescue agency access to victims in Fossil Creek have been closed by the U.S. Forest Service. These road closures have extended rescue and extraction times from a typical 90-minute mission to 5 to 7 hours, and sometimes longer.

Following a major meeting in August, 2019, with Gila County Board of Supervisors and regional public safety officials, one of those roads, the Forest Service 708 Road was opened. This has reduced a 2 hour plus response time by the Pine Strawberry Fire District paramedics to the water fall trail head to 20 to 30 minutes.

I am pleased to see that the final draft plan recognizes the need for this road to remain open to at least public safety agencies and the Forest Service commits to that effort.

I do recommend, however, that the plan be revised to address/resolve the emergency access needs related to the two other roads known as the Upper Springs/Bob Bear Trail and the Flume Trail.

The Uppers Springs/Bob Bear Trail is actually an old two track road that was approved by the Forest Service and constructed in 1962. This "trail" leads 4 miles downhill from the Strawberry side to the headwaters of Fossil Creek known as the "Upper Springs".

Nearly all those persons rescued on the Gila County side of Fossil Creek occurred on the Upper Springs Trail/Bob Bear. For those cases where the hiker is incapacitated, and a Big Wheel litter is required to extract the victim, rescue times continue to average 5 to 7 hours, and sometimes longer, to complete the rescue extraction.

This rescue effort also now requires up to 2 dozen rescue personnel to move the victim as much as 4 miles and uphill, with up to a 1,500-foot elevation gain, to the trailhead and an awaiting ambulance. These rescues nearly always occur in day-time temperatures above 100 degrees with little shade.

This rescue effort also places an extraordinarily high physical demand on the Gila County Sheriff's search and rescue posse members, many whom are above 50 years of age. This physical demand clearly places rescuers at a higher risk of a serious, or fatal, medical event.

The road needs some basic improvement and repairs to allow emergency access by public safety agency using UTV's to gain access to the victim. Once improvements are completed, the current 5-to-7-hour rescue and extraction times likely could be reduced to about 90 minutes.

The second road, called the Flume Trail is really the old Irvin hydro-electric power plants service road that goes 4 miles up hill to the old dam that allowed access for maintenance on the dam and flume infrastructure. The road is in better shape for UTV access than the 708 road. It is presently closed to rescue agencies at the 3-mile mark because a small bridge has been removed.

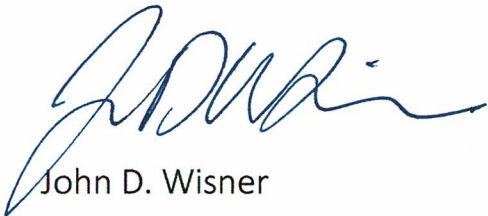
At the 2019 meeting with Tonto National Forest officials and the Forest Supervisor, rescue agencies requested to have UTV access to the bridge location. This would entail moving a few boulders off the road near the entry point and modification of the pedestrian gate to allow UTV passage.

To date, no action has been taken on this action item. Rescue agencies are still requesting access to reduce rescue response and extraction times.

The Gila County Board of Supervisors, as well as the Gila County Sheriff's Office and the Yavapai County Sheriff's Office, the Pine Strawberry Fire District, and the Copper Canyon Fire and Medical Authority, continues to advocate emergency vehicle access to the Upper Springs Trail/road and the Flume Trail/road.

The three roads discussed above provide a means for the public to access the Fossil Creek Wild and Scenic River wilderness area and the importance having rapid public safety access to medical emergencies should not be ignored in the Fossil Creek Comprehensive River Management Plan.

Respectfully,

A handwritten signature in blue ink, appearing to read "J. Wisner", with a stylized flourish at the end.

John D. Wisner

Fire Chief, Pine-Strawberry Fire District